ART PRACTICE AND FINE ART

BY SOETJIPTO WIRSOSARDJONO

One day a friend asked me to look at one of his most personal works; the place that he prays, where he connects with his God. He says that this is where his soul can wander, exploring wherever it wishes, even enabled to conquer time and space, overcoming predetermination. He says that he can meet with any figure that crosses his mind, both those from the past or those that are from now but are far away, provided they also posses this miraculous capacity.

As a layman, what I noticed was the dimly lit atmosphere, the strong scent of incense, interspersed with the aroma of a flower market. There were artefacts. There was a fusion of colours and their arrangement in the room was full of suggestion. Mysterious. In the decoration of this space I failed to see any beauty. It seems that it wasn't me he wanted to impress. I felt the presence of unknown symbols. But through this description I am sure, you will immediately guess. What kind of lifestyle is reflected in my friends explorations?

When I went to leave I received a small gift. A picture of a wayang inscribed on a piece of silver, laid on black velvet. That was the self-image closest to the foundation on which my friend's enthusiastic search for God is based. For me this image of a wayang figure which I knew little of was just a strange little thing. It had the body of Semar and the face of a god. My friend said that is was *Bentara Ismaya,* a "Super God" who manifests in the common people. My imagination began to wander too. Why would Semar, who is from the common people, need to reveal his face as that of a wise god? Doesn't his toothless old face, with his white crest and his supernatural presence actually indicate his mysteriousness? Why must he be revealed to the audience, by turning his face into that of a noble foot soldier?

To this day I have always agreed that artistic expression should reflect our lives, and so should everyday fine art. But to say that it is rich in spontaneity would require some footnotes. From my observations, the imprint of taste, fantasy and imagination into symbology is laden with repetition and mimicry. Even idioms and expression tend to be clichéd, although there are nuances that differentiate expression according to place, time and atmosphere. As a medium for explicating concepts, every-day fine art seems to revolve around just five themes. **Firstly**, the theme of mankind's enthusiasm in accepting God. **Secondly,** preoccupations with self-reflection, and engineering the

reflection of the inner-self through symbol. Colour, form and movement. **Thirdly,** experimentation with societal dynamic and conflicts, and the casting of outlets for their resolution – both serious and playful – however naïve and simple the reference used.

Fourthly, the theme of astonishment in the face of the natural beauty of the universe, and the wisdom of that universe and its contents. **Fifthly,** the documentation of technological dynamics and new findings and reflections on human creativity, ideas, empowerment and disempowerment in the face of this. The explanation of these themes through playing with symbols, colour and shape, even through movement and sound, shows that the traces of traditional fine arts in every-day art are very clear.

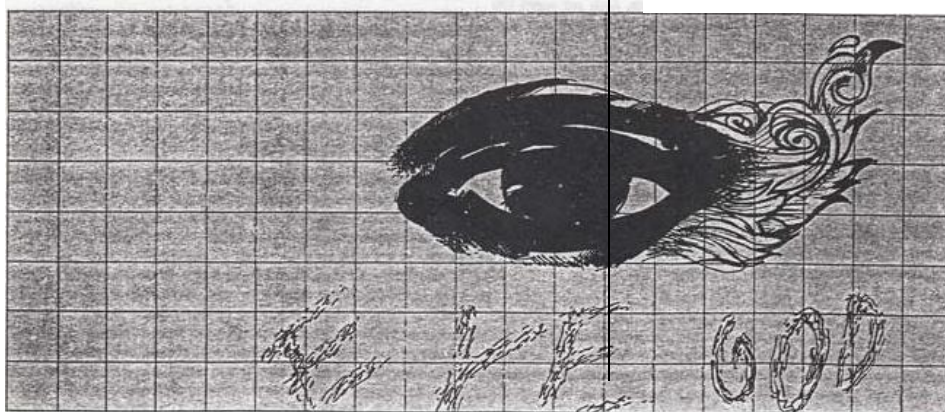
One of the manifestations of every-day artistic expression associated with the first theme, the enthusiasm for theism, is calligraphy. Beautiful writing is not only used symbolically to reify the divine word, but is also mixed with various visualisations. The selection of chapter and verse, the medium used, the colour and the form of the letters can tell us about the tastes of the owner. This depends on the social strata you are observing. What image are they trying to project, in general, with elements of celebration, serenity or just snobbishness? In the Catholic community we find a similar inclination. Various statements about Christ on the cross; merciful faces, with halos emanating an aura of patience and love. A pair of hands clasped in prayer, and so on. In book stores that sell greeting cards, or in furniture stores that sell decorations for walls, ornaments of prayer are issued with various frames and illustrations. So too in Hindu, Buddhists, Chinese communities, even Mystics; these symbols can be found in the homes of pious families, more than mere ornaments or atmospherics. But the every-day fine art on the walls also reflects self-identity.

Often the exposure of every-day art works like this is inappropriately said to reflect a way of life. Because art products that are partly mass produced give the impression that anyone could buy them and put them on the wall. The selection is miscellaneous, things are taken based on taste. Because of this it is more of a medium for playing with self-image than a genuine reflection of personality and lifestyle. Or it may be a vehicle to indicate solidarity and conformity with the surrounding environment. In one aspect, every-day fine art indirectly functions as an effective mode of classification and social differentiation. Although it could well be that unintentionally, mystics may classify themselves through their choice of fine art.

Every-day fine art also defers greatly to the instinct for self-affirmation. That is the second theme of everyday creative works. There are self-portraits or family portraits. Occasionally a self image or a personal style and life style is expressed through the selection of sculptures of idols. I have a friend who tries very hard to place himself in his beautiful paintings wearing mostly Sundanese clothing. Even though in all my life I have never seen him wear a traditional jacket, in ordinary life or at a party, except when his daughter was married. In Java, almost every household that has an awareness of art has pictures of shadow puppets. The heroes are of course ideal characters: Kresna, Gatutkaca, Bima, Semar or Arjuna.

Because of the cultural self image of youth – particularly in the city – has shifted, the instinct for self-affirmation is illustrated by the selection of different heroes to those favoured by traditional society; singers, film-stars, race-drivers, athletes and even characters from advertisements selling their desired products. Rhoma Irama is identified as a hero by youth from the lower social strata. Rambo takes the throne for tough city kids who have no patience with bureaucracy, ceremony and all kinds of formality in resolving problems. Thus hero by hero emerges to confirm their self-image. The characters that become "heroes" have even become flexible and relative; they may be from Scooby Doo, or Peanuts, or Popeye. What is important is the message and character that they stand for and reify, representing the mood that seduces or obsesses youth. In light of this, image can in fact be expressed not only through playing with colour, form, movement and nuance, but also through characterisation or expression, either through affirmation or negation.

Another phenomena that can illuminate and express values is fine art that reveals society's dynamics, social conflicts, hopes and disappointments; even sarcasm. That is the kind of every-day fine art that I have categorised as the third theme. There is a ridiculous and disgusting picture of a tongue poking out, but people like to put it on the wall. There are expressions of cool relaxation, as in "Hang Loose," with the character positioned however it feels like. But dreams, complaints, and peace are also expressed through the montage of form, colour and rhythmic line. If you want to encounter arrogance, power and domination, then you can put up a helmet sticker. In the past before even helmets were banned, these were put up as ornaments of cowardice by random people. Or as symbols of nostalgia for the past: striped shirts with RPKAD insignia or the Police, *MasTrip* (*trans*: the name of a youth troop during the Independence struggle), Navy and so on.

In the past the enthusiasm for servicing the taste for filth could also appear as a picture of a group of young women from the Jaka Tarub legend, bathing half naked; or scenes of embraces from the Damarwulan story. Social conflict is often illustrated through the cruelty of coachmen to the horses that pull their carriages. Now this picture has been replaced by troops on a destroyer ship TomCat, illustrations from SDI or the hustle and bustle of any metropolis anywhere. Then pale, shapeless faces spread fashions or sell style. All of these inflate images of the society's dreams; the good life, the tough one, or a kind of social arrogance visualising the expression 'no way!' But the terrible thing that the common people face is that there must always be an answer and a solution. Make everything easy! Find a pun or an unexpected answer. That's the way to be original. Perhaps this is the spontaneous style and originality of every-day fine art. There is the deceitful – because that pattern is still there – and there is the authentic – because of it its naïve and sometimes stupid expressions. In fact it is this that can express a level of thinking and expression that is shallow but honest.

Then there are even idioms of every-day fine art that praise the universe and its contents: landscape views, but also pictures of animals. A ray of sunlight falling across a cold morning; or the smile of the moon illuminating the night! There are animals, pictures and sounds. There is make-up, which imitates the natural environment: foliage, flowers, gurgling streams, fish and a flickering neighbourhood light. Even every-day fine art is laden with amazement at the cosmos, expressed both in words, songs, colour, form or rhythmic movements.

Perhaps the theme of amazement in the universe is the most egalitarian and least sectarian medium of expression for every-day fine art. Views of nature, the atmosphere of city buildings filled with the gurgling of a waterfall. Or the atmosphere of the shady forest, peaceful and calm. The freedom of wild animals, birds singing, whatever. Maybe the most recent tendency is the every-day art's treatment of technology. In the past the expression of taste in beauty through engineered products and means was cast into the form of artefacts, ornamental weapons like ceremonial daggers, spears, sickles, swords; but also ornaments like agricultural tools and vehicles. Tourist boats from *kutai*, traditional houses from Toraja and so on. Before the technology of children's toys was impacted by all kinds of electronics and mechanics, every-day fine art in Indonesia had already acquired the original products; wayang, all forms of dolls, birds and all kinds of porcelain and terracotta animals, musical instruments; even miniature vehicles like carts, trains, horse-drawn carriages, etc. Now the influence of advertising, alongside the peddling of goods, is selling dreams. Because of this the enthusiasm for technology is heavily influenced by delicious dreams of ready-to-use products. Posters of race cars, sea-planes, tanks; but also factories, computers and even "time tunnels" are ready to buy and put on the wall. For those who are sceptical or sarcastic about these fantasies, there are also products that are sceptical about these technological dreams. Pictures of machines that are completely depleted; pictures of totalled cars, paper basins or grandmothers wearing oxygen masks because of pollution; whatever it means, there is no mistaking that fine art will record the impact of technology on the rhythm of life. I saw a fashion garment that was illuminated, reflecting multicolours. In the market they are selling jewellery that doesn't only sparkle, but also has lights that flicker and blink on command from a microchip that is powered by an invisible battery.

We might arrogantly recognise fine art as a medium for the explication of concepts, a guiding line in the sky pointing in the direction of new concepts. Meanwhile every-day fine art – that is enjoyed, made and refined by broader society – is laden with repetition, mimicry and even appropriation of mass produced creations. Consequently it is difficult to track the departure point of originality and spontaneity: a characteristic of creativity. What's more, with the existing intensity of communication, often every day fine art products are created by a strata of society that is vastly different from the cultural and conceptual level of the consumer community that enjoys it. Perhaps its true, every-day fine art can culturally express the sophistication and character of society. However, parading it as the embodiment of "the complete character of society's fine art" seems a little too much.